



Crayfish

Craig Bihrie

OPPORTUNISTIC OMNIVORES

Crayfish play a central role in the aquatic food chain because of what they eat and what eats them. Which, in both cases, is just about everything.

Crayfish are opportunistic omnivores, eating – dead or alive – tadpoles, snails, fish, plants, algae; whatever they can sink their pinchers into. These lobster-like creatures foster recycling by breaking down what they eat for smaller aquatic animals.

In turn, crayfish are eaten by a host of animals – about 240 species, scientists say – including fish, raccoons, mink, herons, other water birds, and humans. Crayfish hide under logs and in rock crevices, and come out mostly under the cover of darkness to further their chances of survival.

There are records of three crayfish species in North Dakota, but only one is prevalent. The northern crayfish lives in most permanent waters, from streams, rivers and reservoirs, to marshes better known for ducks.

Crayfish have a sci-fi look to them. They have two pairs of sensory antennae; large compound eyes supported on stalks; four pairs of walking legs; and two claw-bearing pinchers used for cutting, capturing food, mating and defense. When defense is not an option, crayfish employ their flipper-like tails to scoot rapidly backward and away from predators.

If a leg is broken off in a scuffle, it will grow back, but likely as a smaller version of the original.

Poke around crayfish habitat enough and you're bound to find the animal's outer shell with no one inside. While the hard exoskeleton provides protection, it limits growth, forcing the occasional change in armor. Molting is common early in life as crayfish grow rapidly, but slows later on. The process is stressful, scientists say, and death, not a new outer shell, is sometimes the result.

Female crayfish carry eggs on their undersides near the tail prior to hatching. She is said to be "in berry" at this time as the egg mass – sometimes hundreds of eggs – looks like a berry. After hatching, young remain attached, or at least stay close to momma, for protection.

Crayfish are wonderful indicators of what is going on in their watery environment. They die in polluted waters, but thrive when conditions are untainted. Sort of like the canary in the coal mine, but just not as cute.

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